

## **Adventures of a Psychotherapist: Community Building with a Therapeutic Agenda**

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Take twenty five years of clinical and community practice and mix with a mid-career excursion into the study of government. Learn a new vocabulary to understand that caucuses are meetings, sentiment is the preferred reference to emotion, human potential translates more or less into social capital and leadership symbolizes the courage to get something done. In 2001 I attended Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and brought home a master of public education and a civic engagement and child advocacy initiative (i.e. community psychology project with political goals) called the Cross-Generation Emotional Literacy Project or CGEL. The purpose of the CGEL Project was to create a program for the effective use of psychological knowledge in government. CGEL therefore integrated some of the best practices of psychology and strategies for volunteer community service.

The CGEL project began in Rochester, New York during 2001. We looked for a new name to reduce confusion with all sorts of medicinal advertisements and reading programs. The name was changed in the fall, 2004 to The Generation Two Initiative: Caring Adults Advocating for Children (G2). The initiative adheres to a positive psychology model (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). According to Csikszentmihalyi (Seligman et al., 2000), the positive effects of insight, love, play and education for individuals and groups deserve further study and applications. The Generation Two Initiative is an "applied side" project. The initiative strives to strengthen children's emotional and social development and their communities. Generation Two

dynamically links the recruitment of senior citizen and young adult volunteers (civic engagement), with the psychological knowledge gained by the volunteers during yearlong friendship building meetings with children (intergeneration relationships) with direct communications to public policy officials (child advocacy) about children's education and health needs.

Generation Two has two goals. To reach the first goal requires that impartial adults successfully forge intergeneration friendships with children. Based on the establishment of empathic relationships, volunteers can emotionally and socially compliment the efforts of parents and teachers. The second goal gives attention to the community in which children and their families live. Generation Two believes grassroots child advocacy can grow from emotional mentoring. When volunteers who listen to children also communicate with public policy makers, stronger and more positive community relations are possible. Volunteers may develop a unique and practical message for public officials whose work often is at great emotional and social distance from their constituents.

### **Civic Engagement**

Generation Two recruits senior citizens (our most experienced voters) and college students (the youngest voters). These segments of the population are selected because they are often prone to disengagement due to age. Robert Putnam's (2001) research depicts how uninvolved citizens remain underused capital or untapped human resources that should be available for community building. Both the wisdom of the seniors and idealism of the college students support Putnam's (2003) optimism about the good use of

social capital to bring communities together. The identification and effective use of social capital relies on building partnerships with senior citizen groups, religious organizations, local colleges and social service clubs. The volunteer recruitment process involves visits to the local organizations for information meetings. We discuss the value of bringing people with different abilities and knowledge together, a potent blend of innocence and wisdom. The selection process involves individual interviews with the candidates at the school sites, security checks and in-service training. Qualified volunteers typically live in the urban or suburban school district where they participate.

### **Intergeneration Relationships**

Children in the first grade are chosen because they face the challenges of more work than play for the first time in their school career. During this critical learning phase they are away from home more than ever. It is beneficial that the children receive specialized emotionally –based experiences that support the relaxation and alertness necessary for social and academic learning at school. . The friendships are meant to strengthen and advance the emotional and social skills that children need (emotional literacy) to prosper inside and outside the school environment. Cohen’s (2004) work suggests this type social support may have positive effects on children’s physical health as well. Furthermore, our youngest and senior generations are often strangers to each other. Generation Two helps bridge this relationship gap. Cohen (2004) reports that a broad range of social relationship (social networks) may buffer both the children and adult friends from the negative effects of stress,

Generation Two friendships evolve from the application of basic play psychotherapy and communication techniques. Since it has been made clear that the purpose of the relationships is not to treat mental illness the rules for engagement are quite different than the traditional clinical model. For example, Generation Two adheres to a transparent and inclusive process. Instead of a consulting room, all meetings with children are held in a public space at the schools. There is no need for confidentiality. Parents, teachers and other visitors pass through the cafeteria or library or hallway and quietly observe. The Generation Two program does not use screening instruments that target at risk children. This is a universal program where all children in a classroom receive parent permission to participate. There are no stigmas attached to leaving the classroom. The children are invited to weekly play and conversation meetings. The volunteer friends meet with the same three or four children throughout the year and form relaxing and supportive relationships. Children choose or initiate the direction and themes of the transactions. An assortment of play activities and toys are available in small suitcases on wheels. The volunteers empathically nurture the children's attempts to identify and communicate their thoughts and feelings through encouragement, praise and suggestion. Small group academic activities are scheduled for the children who remain in the classroom. Teachers often invite the volunteers into the classroom during special events, particularly holiday celebrations and plays.

### **Volunteer Training**

There is evidence that non-professional adults can effectively learn basic child-centered psychotherapy skills that result in emotionally supportive relationships with

children (Cowen, Trost, & Izzo, 1976). The Generation Two program strictly adheres to a child-centered rather than curriculum-based approach. The program teaches specific therapeutic techniques that adhere to Carl Roger's client-centered (1951) communication approach as well as Virginia Axline's (1947) reliable play therapy techniques. Mental health professionals present in-service programs about the uses of empathy, acceptance, listening, open questions, play and self-disclosure. Often the senior volunteers consider these methods the outgrowth of common sense. An in-service program entitled: *The Art of Friendship Building Across Generations* is presented prior to meetings with the children. In-service training and support continues throughout the year. There are once per month programs. The topics include: the meaning and uses of play (Schaefer, 1979; Gilberg, 1999), Erikson's (1979) psycho-social stages of development, how children think (Piaget, 1962) and a workshop regarding how to say good-bye at the end of the year. There are 30 minute supervision groups every week and the volunteers keep journals that describe the evolving friendships. The in-service programs also include twice per year "parent-volunteer dialogues" that provide opportunities for parents to discuss their observations and ask questions. Parents and teachers are invited to all in-service programs and they can read the journals.

### **Child Advocacy**

. Generation Two child advocacy work requires that volunteers speak to policy makers through direct democratic means. It is not unusual that adults who work closely with children or who are raising them find education public policy incomprehensible or an interference with a child's development. For example, *The Leave No Child Behind*

mandates often place unnecessary burdens on local school district budgets. The reliance on “high stakes” standardized testing may distort the learning process for children as young as fourth grade. A Generation Two child advocacy committee researches how the implementation of national policy effects local education. The advocacy committee informs the volunteers about policy issues on a regular basis. Our volunteer friends consider what they learn from the children and their advocacy committee. They choose when and where to speak out. They may engage in letter writing campaigns, petition drives, public speaking engagements and voting in order to communicate about education policies that hinder or benefit children and their families. The goal is to create a good fit between local need and state or national policies, a systems level mutually empathic relationship. The volunteers work themselves and mobilize their peers to form an advocacy network that reflects the best use of social capital on behalf of children.

### **Community Building with a Therapeutic Agenda**

My experience as a psychologist, student of government and community organizer tells me that many people from different walks-of-life share aspirations and goals that may improve the lives of their fellow citizens. Unfortunately they do not have the time or inclination to create bridges across professional expertise, religious persuasion or economic class. Each group’s territory appears embedded in and protected by a language of specialization that is difficult to decipher. Misunderstanding may alienate one group from another. Our own American Psychological Association learned how the United States Congress could misinterpret and harshly react to research regarding the limited longitudinal effects of sexual abuse on an individual’s development by Rind,

Tromovitch, and Bauserman (1998). When our national legislators identified the data as immoral support for adult- child sexual relations, APA significantly bolstered its efforts to proactively bring scientific knowledge to policy makers. George Albee (2002) wrote about the difficulties of working in the three worlds of politics, the media and academics. He stated that there should be distinct boundaries and identities for these disciplines, yet communication must be improved. In the same American Psychologist Special Issue about psychology and government, Bennet Bertenthal (2002) called for continued community outreach that educates the public and communicates to government.

The Generation Two Initiative responds to Berenthal's (2002) "Challenges and Opportunities in Psychological Science". Psychology practice and community service run along an advocacy continuum. The child's psychotherapist always advocates for the mental health of the client. The therapist turned consultant, regularly relies on empirically based principles of therapy when visiting schools to improve the classroom environment for an emotionally vulnerable child. When volunteers learn about this therapeutic sequence of events they develop a coherent perspective for effective advocacy work. Volunteers convert knowledge gained from implementing basic principles of child psychotherapy into wide ranging advocacy activities that inform the public, both the volunteers and public officials, about children's emotional and learning needs. Volunteers advocate by moving from a child-centered or "bottom up" perspective rather than from the "top down" in the political system. Perhaps the therapeutic process is inherently a breeding ground for understanding principles of children's rights.

**Results: Intergeneration Friendship Building**

The most unpredictable aspect of the initiative proved to be the recruitment component. The relationship building process is occasionally destabilized by personal illness, illness of a family member or travel commitments. Research during the first two years included pre- and post-year questionnaires to assess the value of the initiative. The data suggested that children and volunteers prospered from the weekly experiences. Children in both the urban and suburban school sites regularly exhibited relaxed, cooperative and joyful behavior during their meetings. The observations of teachers, volunteers and school administrators were consistent about the children's enthusiasm. A commonplace anecdotal result was that the children talked about their "friends" throughout the week. Furthermore, while 30 of 36 parents gave their permission during the first year, 120 out of 130 kindergarten families from the pilot school requested that their child participate the next year. A documentary (in production) will provide additional qualitative data about the process of friendship building across demographics. Empirical evaluations began in the fall, 2004 in order to assess whether the emotional and social mentoring would positively affect classroom behavior and achievement. Many participants question whether Generation Two needs to have a direct impact on academic achievement.

### **Results: Child Advocacy**

Most volunteers participate in child advocacy efforts. During the first year volunteers went on a petition drive to support their suburban superintendent of schools. Senior citizens collected signatures on petitions that advocated for responsible financing for the children's schools. The chancellor of the New York Education Department had

threatened to fire the superintendent and school board for not submitting a budget on time. Generation Two supported the superintendent's refusal since the New York State Legislature could not pass a state budget. Last year the child advocates protested the closing of a vital neighborhood city school through a letter writing campaign and public speaking at a school board meeting. This year there is work to bring the suburban and urban volunteers together who will oppose the closing of several city schools. The reasons for closing schools are financial problems and a declining student population. Generation Two volunteers take the position that a decreasing population marks a window of opportunity for the creation of smaller schools within multiple use facilities. Advocacy has begun through a December 2004 Generation Two conference, contact with the city school administration and submission of an op-ed article to the local newspaper.

Anecdotal reports from the discussion group leaders suggest that after the volunteers learn more about the children their interest and concern about each child's classroom and home life increases. During the recent Friends and Volunteer Conference the volunteers expressed appreciation for their personal gains. The discussion focused on how positive relationships superceded racial prejudice, religious difference, and economic class.

## **Conclusion**

Generation Two volunteers advocate for the first grade child's emotional and social competence. The initiative borrows from the most reliable child psychotherapy communication skills to support intergenerational friendships. An outgrowth of the friendships is child advocacy. Generation Two empowers the youngest generation

through an advocacy network across demographics. Next year Generation Two will move to a rural community where high school students volunteer as the children's friends and advocates. The implementation of the Generation Two Initiative will have completed its first therapeutic journey across demographics.

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